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SUBJECT: EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS: BACKGROUND

SUMMARY

11. The first European Parliament (EP) elections in a newly enlarged EU will be held June 10-13. The EP has important budgetary powers, and decision-making powers on transportation, environment, data privacy and development aid, all significant issues in U.S.-EU relations. Candidates run as national party members but function in the EP as part of European party groups. The number of representatives (MEPs) for each country is roughly proportional to population. We expect low voter turnout and emphasis on member-state domestic issues to be key features of the elections. END SUMMARY.

SERIES OF PRE-ELECTION REPORTS

12. This is the first in a series of reports on the European elections. The second message will provide general background on the European elections campaign. Subsequent telegrams will go into more detail on the role of U.S.-EU relations in the elections, the reelection prospects of key MEPs, possible realignment of party groups, and the expected influence of MEPs from the countries set to join the EU on May 1.

THE EP ROLE IN THE EU: BACKGROUND

13. The European Parliament (EP) was created in 1962 when the European Coal and Steel Community Assembly decided to describe itself as the "European Parliament." It became one of the three main EU institutions, with the appointed European Commission as an executive arm representing "Community interests" and the Council of Ministers representing member-state governments. In 1976, the member states adopted an act providing for direct elections of MEPs to five-year terms, making the EP the only directly elected EU institution. The first elections were held in 1979. As its powers have developed over time, the EP has become arguably the only directly elected supra-national assembly in the world with effective decision-making power.

EP: WHAT IT CAN DO

14. The EP does not fulfill all of the functions of traditional national parliaments. It cannot raise revenues for the EU (member-state governments do that) or initiate legislation (the European Commission has the sole right of initiative on EU-level legislation). Nonetheless, the EP has steadily gained powers under the successive European treaties, and this trend is expected to continue if an EU constitutional treaty is approved. The EP's powers consist principally of: (1) budgetary powers - The EP can amend and must give final approval to the EU budget except for agricultural expenditures; (2) "co-decision" power, shared equally between the EP and the member states, to amend or reject Commission-initiated legislation in many areas -- including areas that can affect U.S. interests such as transportation, data protection, environment and development aid; and (3) oversight and monitoring of the other EU institutions. The European Parliament also has the final say on the accession of new member states, and can vote to approve or reject, collectively, the European Commissioners appointed by the member states.

AFTER ENLARGEMENT

15. The number of MEPs has risen with each enlargement to today's 626 seats. Seat allocation is determined according to population, but with a minimal threshold for smaller countries and considerably more voters per MEP in the larger countries than in the other member states. In June, the first elections in an EU of 25 member states, about 340 million voters will be called on to elect the largest EP ever - a total of 732 MEPs. The number of languages for interpretation and translation will increase from 11 to 21 languages (410 possible combinations of languages for interpretation). The number of MEPs per country will be:

-- Germany - 99
-- France, Italy, UK - 78
-- Spain, Poland - 54
-- Netherlands- 27
-- Belgium, Czech Rep., Greece, Hungary, Portugal - 24
-- Sweden - 19
-- Austria - 18
-- Denmark, Finland, Slovakia - 14
-- Ireland, Lithuania - 13
-- Latvia - 9
-- Slovenia - 7
-- Luxembourg, Estonia, Cyprus - 6
-- Malta - 5

POLITICAL GROUPS IN THE EP

16. MEPs are elected in their countries on national party lists, with each country's seats allocated on a proportional basis. MEP's then unite in transnational political party groupings in the EP. The Socialists/Social Democrats (PES) and the Christian Democrats/Conservatives (EPP-ED) have always been the two largest groups, with a constantly changing pattern of smaller groups. The EPP-ED came out of the 1999 elections as the largest group, with 233 EPP-ED seats to 179 for the PES. The Liberal group (ELDR-now 53 seats), the Greens (now 45 seats) and the far-Left (GUE-NGL-now 44 seats) all significantly increased in numbers.

LOW INTEREST IN EP ELECTIONS

17. Preliminary indications are that voters' lack of understanding of the EP will again result in a decline in voter participation. So far, turnout has steadily dwindled in each successive election -- from 63 percent in 1979 to an all-time low of 49 percent in 1999. According to a Eurobarometer poll published in February, fewer than 30 percent of respondents in 11 member states (Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Poland, Ireland, Spain, Austria, Portugal and the UK) said they would "definitely vote" in June. Estonia came in last with only 14 percent. Only in Denmark, Sweden and Greece did more than 50 percent say they would definitely vote. Another factor contributing to low voter turnout is that many voters do not see the relevance of the EP for their daily lives. Although EU-wide issues such as Turkey's EU accession and U.S.-EU relations will play a role in the campaign (septels), polls indicate the EP elections will focus mainly on issues voters associate not with the EU, but with the performance of their national governments, such as employment, crime, and immigration.

FOSTER